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ABSTRACT

In response both to interests within the foreign language teaching profession and to a new Texas law mandating oral proficiency standards for foreign language teachers, Tarrant County Junior College developed a number of curriculum changes in French, German, Spanish, and English for Speakers of Other Languages. The primary first-year emphasis and continuing major emphasis in the second year of these programs are oral communication skills, listening comprehension, and speaking. These skills continue to be stressed in third-year French and Spanish civilization courses. In addition, one-credit elective courses are offered that are important components of the programs of students seeking oral proficiency. Some are specifically designed for particular aspects of oral proficiency. In each language there are also multiple levels of conversation courses. Some courses whose primary emphasis is the development of reading and writing skills also include consistent listening and/or speaking practice opportunities. Also, in direct response to the state mandate, two new courses each in French, German, and Spanish have been developed. One is a conversation course for high school students who have completed at least one year of high school language study, and the other is a conversation course for teachers needing to develop or maintain fluency in oral skills. The courses have proved to be very popular. (MSE)

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ORAL PROFICIENCY: A CURRICULUM RESPONSE OF A COMMUNITY/JUNIOR COLLEGE

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Our professional conferences have almost always included workshops and/or other sessions centered on instructional methodologies, how languages should be taught, usually on one specific technique for language teaching. Historically, dissatisfaction in student learning outcomes has resulted in disenchantment by many professionals with a variety of instructional methodologies, a few of which are grammar/translation, audio-lingual, transformational grammar, learning activity packages, and in some cases Total Physical Response and the Dartmouth Approach.

One of our problems as a profession is that there are a number of desirable language skills to be developed in students and limited time available to us to teach these skills. For example, listening comprehension is critical for acquiring information in conversation. Speaking ability is required to order a meal or to ask directions. Reading is fundamental to follow instructions as well as to study a newspaper or to enjoy literature. Writing is essential for one's personal correspondence. Grammatical accuracy is desirable to be well understood. Cultural information helps to become socially acceptable. Language acquisition skills make the entire language-learning process more efficient and more fun. Therefore, an

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issue preliminary to that of instructional technique is one of curriculum. What will be the goals of instruction? Which skills should be developed first? There are many and varied good teaching strategies and methods, some more appropriate in encouraging the development of one skill than another. Methodology can be determined only in relation to each aspect of the curriculum.

Largely due to the work of ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and in my own state of Texas to the leadership of key individuals in the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Foreign Language Association, an important emphasis in language instruction in Texas public elementary and secondary schools will be on oral proficiency. New curriculum guides are currently being developed at the state level to assist local faculty in the development of teaching plans to encourage instructional goals in oral proficiency.

Simultaneously, a new Texas law has mandated that all university students who seek certification to teach in the public schools of the state must pass an examination in their teaching field(s) before being certified. An important part of that test is expected to be an oral proficiency interview exam.

In order to respond to the background of its student population entering the junior college from the public schools and to the learning needs of its students

universities, the community/junior college must provide a curriculum which includes oral proficiency skill development.

Tarrant County Junior College Northeast Campus has such a curriculum. In French, German, Spanish, and English for Speakers of Other Languages, the primary emphases in the first year and continuing major emphases in the second year are oral communication skills, listening comprehension and speaking. In the third-year civilization courses in French and in Spanish, oral communication skills continue to be stressed.

In addition to the regular sequence of courses, the TCJC foreign language program has a flexible curriculum of elective one-hour courses. Many of these courses are important components in the curriculum of a student seeking oral proficiency as a personal goal.

Some of the one-hour courses are specifically designed to teach particular aspects of oral proficiency. For example, in French Pronunciation students practice discriminating sounds and words, a basic recognition skill. Each level of Listening Comprehension in each language is based on taped conversations and aural multiple-choice questions and responses with nothing in print, pure ear training. There are currently being taught two levels in French and German, three in Spanish, and four in ESOL.

In each language there are also multiple levels of conversation courses. These, too, are one-hour classes

each week in addition to the regular courses, providing more time for added practice in real communication, often more spontaneous conversation than in the regular sequence courses which have objectives in several skills. There are presently two levels of conversation in German, three in Spanish, and four in French and ESOL.

In addition to the courses specifically designed to teach oral communication skills, some courses whose primary emphasis is the development of reading and writing skills also include listening and/or speaking practice opportunities.For example, in Introduction to Reading in French, all the lessons have a required listening section and optional recording assignments. Grammar courses in German and Spanish have requirements for taping. French Grammar IV is taught in French, necessitating regular listening comprehension and speaking. Thus, oral communication skills are consistently used by faculty and students as the normal communication tool and are, therefore, perceived as important.

In direct response to the new efforts for oral proficiency at the state level in Texas, we have added to the curriculum two new courses each in French, German, and Spanish. One is for high school students who have completed at least one year of language study in their high school. At TCJC, with our emphasis on listening and speaking in our elementary courses and, therefore, in our advanced placement exams, most high

school graduates challenging these courses by exam do well on the limited grammatical portions of the test, but many of them have difficulty in listening comprehension and speaking sections. To give students more time and opportunity for practice in oral communication, we offer a conversation course in each language especially for high school students. Each class meets one evening per week each semester. Since spring semester, 1985, is the first offering in Spanish and in German and French has been taught for only two semesters before, there are insufficient data to determine whether the classes are positively effective. However, students seem pleased with their efforts and are recommending the courses to their friends.

The other new offering in each language is a conversation course for teachers who need to develop or to maintain their oral communication skills. Since most language teachers spend most of their instructional time with beginning students, they necessarily limit their usual range of structure and vocabulary use to simple forms and concrete objects, often losing their ease and fluency in normal conversation although teaching the language. With the current emphasis on oral proficiency, these same teachers need to be continuing to develop their own language abilities. A special conversation course for language teachers in the area elementary and secondary schools is currently being offered in French, in German, and in Spanish. Classes in French and in Spanish have been taught in previous semesters, both to appreciative groups of teachers.

These one-hour elective courses which support the development of oral proficiency, basically listening comprehension and conversation at a variety of levels and for various populations, enroll many students. A number of reasons may explain their popularity:

1. Each additional one-hour course provides one more hour of class time each week for language practice. Since time on task is one of the critical factors in skill development, obviously more time is beneficial. Students like to do what they do well, and the additional time helps them to improve their language performance.

2. The courses are elective. A student can feel in control of his curriculum, choosing to place additional emphasis on oral proficiency.

3. Students often feel somewhat ill at ease in large classes, becoming hesitant to speak, thereby limiting their own practice. Conversation classes are limited to ten participants, reducing some of the anxiety.

4. A student may enroll at an appropriate level of instruction for his oral language abilities, regardless of his capabilities in written communication skills. His listening comprehension level may be different from his reading comprehension level. He can be placed into a conversation section that will neither bore nor

overwhelm him.

5. Extra courses offer opportunities for students with no high school language background to gain valuable oral experience and, thereby, confidence. As a result, sometimes the program can hold students who might otherwise drop out of their language study.

6. There are additional courses for students to take after they complete the regular sequence. After having worked hard to learn to speak a second language at a basic level, some students wish to continue to develop their skills. Advanced conversation classes provide an opportunity for continued growth.

7. Some students use conversation classes, which are small and tend to be a relaxed, comfortable situation, as a social outlet. Students who take conversation courses together over a period of several semesters often become friends and like to maintain these relationships in continued classes.

Oral proficiency is only one of the goals of language instruction, but it is certainly a very important goal. Recognizing the importance of oral communication skills and believing the junior college to be in an unique position in the educational community between the high schools and the universities, the Department of Foreign Languages at Tarrant County Junior

College Northeast Campus is attempting to respond to the instructional needs of its varied constituency with its elective flexible curriculum.